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## Teaching applied politics: from employability to political imaginary

Edwin Bacon

**Abstract.** The growth of applied politics teaching in recent years is often conflated by academics, institutions, and professional associations with the employability agenda increasingly promoted by government. Many academics – politics faculty to the fore – object to the imposition of neo-liberal values on universities, the commodification of higher education, and a focus on employability in their teaching. These developments, coupled with a sense that the teaching of practical politics lacks intellectual rigour, undermine the growth of applied politics courses and programmes. There is, however, no reason why applied politics teaching must embrace neo-liberal norms. Nor is the alternative the introduction, as has happened in a few institutions, of courses teaching the practice of radical activism. Norms and values in applied politics can come from students, producing content and knowledge as they develop skills and approaches to practical politics. Applied politics itself represents a bridge between political science and political life beyond the university, and serves the needs of students across the ‘careerist-activist’ spectrum. Far from being intellectually light, a values-focused approach to applied politics has a pedagogical depth beyond that offered in much of the current politics curriculum. It offers a pedagogy not just of information, but of formation and transformation.

### Introduction – applied politics, employability, and the state

Debates around the teaching and learning of politics at university occur at the nexus of student interests, government interventions, institutional strategies, and academics’ normative concerns over the nature and purpose of politics as an academic discipline. The positions of these four actors – students, government, institutions and academics – are all present to varying degrees in the literature on the teaching of applied politics in UK universities. When it comes to discussion of syllabi that include practical politics, placements, and other modes of experiential learning, the rationale behind such approaches centres on employability. Developments in this direction are repeatedly framed within the context of perceived demand from students and government that ‘more must be done to address the variability in employment outcomes for some graduates and to ensure all students and employers get the best returns on their investment’ (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2016: 42). With universities invariably keen to be seen to oblige state and students, as both the immediate source of and conduit for much of their income, the employment market discourse is all but hegemonic.

Of the four actors noted above, however, those least likely to buy into such a discourse are politics academics. Amongst politics academics can be found a more critical stance with regard to the place of applied politics in the undergraduate syllabus. This criticism stems partly from questions over the intellectual rigour of modules based around political practice, and partly from a reaction to the near-hegemonic discourse of employability and the market. The notion that universities in general, let alone politics departments, should see their role as supporting the neo-liberal narrative of government is not one held dear by many politics lecturers, amongst whom there exists unease at the instrumentalisation of education implicit in a funding model that burdens students with tens of thousands of pounds in debt by the time they graduate. A Higher Education Academy-funded publication in 2010 talked of the consensus in the UK political science community that ‘linking

education with a country's economic needs in some way devalues higher education' (Wyman and Longwell 2010: 124). Recent survey work amongst politics academics in the UK found a frustration at 'constantly being told to "do employability more" by university managers', and respondents raised the issue central to this paper – that employability discourse majors on a neo-liberal agenda of business and entrepreneurialism rather than civic engagement and public service (Lee, Foster et al. 2013: 31). At the more formal level, the Political Studies Association (PSA), the professional association for politics academics in the UK, gave written evidence to a parliamentary committee rejecting the notion that there is somehow a relationship between employability-focused measures – specifically the salary that a graduate earns – and the quality of teaching in politics departments, and arguing that such measures ought not to be used as justification for further fee increases (Djurkovic 2015: 1).

Politics degrees are not narrowly vocational, neither providing a license to practise nor indeed a career-focused qualification. Politics itself, however, has a robust claim to being vocational in the wider sense – stemming etymologically from the Latin verb *vocare* – of a calling and life purpose. Max Weber's famous lecture *Politik als Beruf* has been known in English as *Politics as a Vocation* since it was translated by Gerth and Mills in the 1940s (Weber, Gerth et al. 1946). The rendering of the lecture's title draws on similar etymological roots – with the German verb *rufen* likewise meaning 'to call' – but the early draft of its English translation was titled *Politics as a Profession* (Oakes and Vidich 1999: 20). As Jens Borchert has pointed out, there is an ambiguity in the German noun *Beruf* that speaks of both spiritual calling and materially remunerative occupation (Borchert 2007: 53-54). Weber himself argued that 'there are two ways of making politics one's vocation: either one lives "for" politics or one lives "off" politics' (Weber, Gerth et al. 1946: 84). Such ambiguity is not simply a matter for scholarly analysis and academic dispute; it plays out at the heart of contemporary anti-politics in western democracies. Public disaffection with formal politics, and disconnection from its political actors, is often expressed through criticism of professional politicians, seen to be more motivated by climbing the career ladder than by changing the world (Hay 2007: 121). The association of the professionalisation of politics with disengagement from the political process offers sceptical politics academics a further argument against promoting a narrow emphasis on employability in their teaching.

This article argues that an employability focus represents just one possible justification for the teaching of applied politics, but that its near ubiquity in the discourse around such teaching masks normative, pedagogical, and intellectual rationales more readily acceptable to many academics. There is no inherent reason why the learning and teaching of applied politics should major on profession over vocation, living *off* politics over living *for* politics, conformity over activism, or ladder-climbing over world-changing. So stark a dichotomy is unnecessary. It is possible – indeed, I argue, preferable – to approach applied politics teaching in such a way as to enhance the lives of both those who would do their politics negotiating in committee rooms, and those who would do their politics protesting halfway up a cooling tower. Undergirding discussion of the normative content and goals of applied politics teaching, I set out the case for the place of more practically-oriented modules in the politics programmes of universities from the perspective of the nature and purpose of politics as an academic discipline. This article contends that the teaching of politics is enhanced by a pedagogy not simply of *information*, but of *formation* and *transformation*,

acknowledging that as we practise politics we interact not only with the cerebral world of theory but also with more intuitive political imaginaries. In doing so, it engages with older, and fundamental, debates around the study of politics and its purpose as a world-forming enterprise. The article is not a 'how to' guide to teaching applied politics, although it does draw on examples from modules covering the practice of politics.<sup>1</sup> Rather it sets out the case that applied politics teaching need not restrict itself to the role of enhancing employability but can be taught with both normative breadth and intellectual depth.

In setting out this overview of my argument, one cautionary corrective is needed. To widen the rationale for teaching applied politics, and to provide an alternative to the near-hegemonic, justificatory discourse of employability, is not to reject the case for universities and their politics departments enhancing the employment prospects of their students. Careers after graduation and the relationship between student debt and the salaries of graduates do not represent the only reason for teaching applied politics, but they take their place within the overarching rationale. For many students, their first enthusiasm for courses on the practice of politics stems from a looming awareness of the need to earn a living, be that in politics or not, and relief that at last their degree programme is addressing the question of how to 'do politics'. It is the task of applied politics teaching to locate such legitimate enthusiasms in an intellectual and pedagogical context that engages too with fundamental questions of personal formation, political transformation, and the nature of politics as a discipline.

### **The growth of applied politics**

Pedagogical discussion in the fields of politics and international relations in recent years has repeatedly returned to the relationship between what is taught on our degree programmes and the lives of our students 'beyond the classroom' (Craig, Curtis et al. 2012). Such a focus on 'student engagement with politics and the world of work' (Curtis and Blair 2010) has covered a range of initiatives seeking to facilitate experiential learning, including placements, community engagement projects, service learning, simulations, and social activism (Curtis 2010: 93; Craig 2012: 149). My own engagement with this aspect of pedagogical development in applied politics comes through the teaching of a practice of politics module, drawing on and developing alongside similar courses run by Matthew Wyman at the University of Keele and Jennifer Lees-Marshment at the University of Auckland (Wyman and Longwell 2010; Lees-Marshment 2016).

The 'Practice of Politics' module enhances students' awareness of the world of political practice from the perspective of their own values and skills, and explores ways in which they might engage with that world. At the outset of the module, participants audit their own political values, motivations, and skills. This initial focus on the inner convictions and visions of students serves two particular purposes. First, a student's starting point is the consideration of political rather than occupational outcomes; not to exclude looking towards what they might do after graduation, but to facilitate a match between future roles/jobs and what inspires them in political life. Second, beginning from

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<sup>1</sup> Readers interested in more detail of the content of practice of politics modules than provided by the overview in this article can find a module outline of the Keele University module in Wyman and Longwell, 2010, pp. 138-50, and downloadable resources from the University of Auckland practice of politics module at [www.coursesites.com/s/\\_TeachingPracticeofPolitics](http://www.coursesites.com/s/_TeachingPracticeofPolitics)

reflection on students' values means that the normative content of the module comes from the group, rather than being imposed by the lecturer. From any group of students studying the practice of politics, a range of different political and purposive positions emerges.

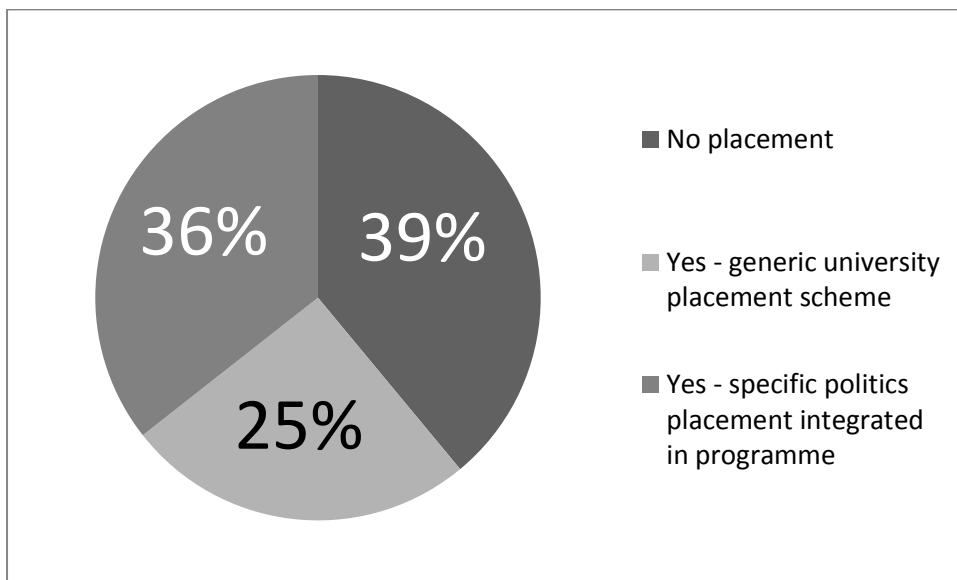
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Working within the context of a variety of political and purposive positions reflects the 'real world', where political actors must engage with those whose values they do not share. This provides the essential setting within which students on the module explore such skills and processes as constructive political discussion, decision-making, achieving consensus, public speaking, formal debating, lobbying, and producing different forms of written communication such as position papers or blogs. The exploration of these elements of political practice seeks to meld individual instincts and values with theoretical understanding as the class engages with practice-based activities such as decision-making simulations, communication tasks, mock interviews, and so on. Within a typical class there is no lecture *per se* but periods of tutor-delivered introductions to theoretical insights – for example, an introduction to key elements of political communication theory, to Lukes' understanding of the dimensions of power (Lukes 2005), or to Sennett's work on the politics of cooperation (Sennett 2012) – which then inform discussion, critical self-reflection, and engagement with practice. The *modus operandi* of the module includes students working together to negotiate particular elements of the curriculum – for example, topics for formal debate or for brief-writing – in order that the very process of taking the module involves them in having to explore ways of achieving outcomes, coming to agreements, and so on. To reflect the importance of such interaction in political practice, a percentage of the final grade is awarded by peer assessment of one another's contribution to such cooperative working.

It is worth emphasising that the 'values first' approach to teaching applied politics includes and does not reject deep consideration of how students might practise politics after university. Each week the module has an external speaker from a different walk of political life – some who have made their career in politics-related activity (civil servants, diplomats, NGO employees, political journalists), some who have worked towards elected positions that eventually become their job, and some whose political practice takes place independently of their employment (campaigners, activists, party volunteers). Care is taken to include a balanced roster of external speakers in terms of gender, ethnicity, career path, and political persuasion, and the module has a preference for avoiding 'big name' speakers in favour of those less removed from the position of the students. In this way the module *does* provide a focus on careers awareness and employability, at the same time as illustrating that the practice of politics can also take place outwith or alongside career development. A highlight of teaching a practice of politics module is to see different students enthusiastically questioning and engaging after class with different visiting speakers, according to their own political practice preferences. Just as Weber's *Politik als Beruf* can be rendered as both 'politics as a vocation' and 'politics as a profession', so an applied politics module that focuses on political vocation, in the wider values- and purpose-based sense, also includes, but does not limit itself to, consideration of political jobs and careers.

Applied politics modules (practice of politics courses and the like) seek to engage students with life outside of and after university. In this respect they are welcomed by universities and the profession for their contribution to the fashionable employment agenda. For example, the Political Studies Association *Study Politics* guide for potential students highlights the fact that ‘several politics departments offer placements ... adding significantly to your employability’ (Djurkovic, Harris et al.: 11). A survey of the websites of the over 60 English universities offering single honours politics and/or international relations degrees in 2016-17 reveals that more than half now include the opportunity for students to engage in workplace placements (Figure One). Within this total, however, a distinction can be made between those that allow students to add a placement year (typically between the second and final years of their programme) as part of an institution-wide policy, and those departments that offer politics-specific placements, from two weeks to one year in length, integrated into their degree programme. It is rare for placements to be a compulsory element of a degree programme, and a number of the more prominent placement opportunities (such as parliamentary placements offered by, for example, the universities of Bath, Hull, Leeds, and Liverpool) are allocated by competitive application.

**Figure One. English universities offering placement opportunities for politics undergraduates, 2016-17**



Universities in the United Kingdom today tend to respond with alacrity not just to formal state requirements, but also to hints and nudges with regard to government preferences. The focus on the ‘graduate premium’ in lifetime earnings that made up much of the accompanying justification for the introduction of £9000 annual tuition fees in 2012 found its outworking in increased emphasis in higher education institutions on ‘graduate destination’, the preparation of students for the world of work, and league tables for employability. Marketing departments began branding their universities accordingly. The University of West London calls itself ‘The Career University’, and many universities publicise the job prospects of their students, highlighting claims to be number one<sup>2</sup> or two<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Robert Gordon University <http://www.rgu.ac.uk/>; Arts University Bournemouth <http://aub.ac.uk/course-info/course-news/aub-no1-employability/>;

<sup>3</sup> Bishop Grosseteste University [www.bishopg.ac.uk](http://www.bishopg.ac.uk)

nationally, number one in their region,<sup>4</sup> or even 'top 20'<sup>5</sup> in the graduate employment rankings. A close reading of departmental websites found that where politics departments in Russell Group universities talk about employability, it is most often as a by-product of the general intellectual calibre of their degrees, whereas post-1992 universities tend to emphasise more explicit employability-related curriculum content (Lee, Foster et al. 2016: 100).

Initiatives such as placements and an institutional focus on employability for marketing purposes can to some extent be seen as being at one remove from scholarly activity. Institutional straplines rarely spring from consultation with academics. Placements, by definition, take place away from the university (albeit that those integrated in a programme may involve some post-placement assessment and, in a few cases, entail some preparatory course beforehand). Teaching applied politics within a degree programme, however, is a different, and far rarer, order of engagement for politics faculty. As noted earlier, association with the employment agenda can be problematic in university politics departments, with such an emphasis often seen as bringing a focus on skills, process, and presentation, and as such, lacking the intellectual depth appropriate to undergraduate study. Alongside criticism of course content comes the more normative critique of the employability agenda, seeing participation in a government-imposed, market-oriented, neoliberal approach to education as an inappropriate function for universities to perform. From this perspective, applied politics modules represent niche provision away from the intellectual and disciplinary mainstream.

A recent article in *Politics* reported the findings of a survey of academics in UK politics departments in relation to the employability agenda in the curriculum, noting their 'concern with what they saw as the neoliberal agenda underpinning the expression of employability within higher education' and related disquiet with regard to wider questions around 'the status of the profession, and its relationship to its object' (Lee, Foster et al. 2016: 108). The authors adopted a blunter tone in an earlier version of the same article, identifying 'serious scepticism' amongst a number of academic respondents, and the feeling that an explicit skills-and-employability approach 'irritates students because there is such an obvious disjuncture with the subject-specific curricular content' (Lee, Foster et al. 2013: 31).

For some of the pioneers of teaching the practice of politics, a focus on employability and careers justifies itself in a clear-cut instrumental manner. The logic is straightforward: students pay large fees that most of them fund, along with their living expenses whilst at university, through loans which they then have to pay back. Universities therefore owe it to their students to help them towards sufficiently remunerative careers. Wyman and Longwell acknowledge a consensus of distaste amongst politics faculty in the United Kingdom for the 'commodification' of higher education which is seen as inherent in a focus on employability. Their robust response, however, is that 'widespread resistance to engaging with employability issues in any depth represents an abdication of the subject community's responsibilities to its students' (Wyman and Longwell 2010: 124). A similar emphasis on the world of work is apparent on the website *Teaching the Practice of Politics*, which introduces itself as a resource to help students to 'understand the wide range of politically-related jobs available to them, consider what they might most be suited to, help them get and succeed in those jobs' (Lees-Marshment 2016). For students as a whole, their motives when

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<sup>4</sup> University of Derby [www.derby.ac.uk](http://www.derby.ac.uk)

<sup>5</sup> University of Hull [www.hull.ac.uk](http://www.hull.ac.uk)

they choose a degree combine both a disciplinary interest – in our case, an interest in politics – with an awareness of their future working lives. As a recent longitudinal survey of university applicants in the UK confirms, the most common reasons for students choosing to go to university are ‘career plans, belief that it would enable them to get a good job, enjoyment of their subject, and desire to realise their potential’ (Purcell, Elias et al. 2008: xii). Each year I undertake a version of this survey with undergraduate politics students at Birkbeck, University of London, and each year the results match the findings of Purcell, Elias et al.

For most politics faculty, however, questions of the ideological or pragmatic justifications for teaching applied politics are already a step beyond where they are. These modules are not yet common across degree programmes in politics. The contention of this article is that their dissemination will to some extent be facilitated by making the case that applied politics both has a claim to intellectual robustness as a sub-discipline, and can be taught from a perspective that is more critical than a mere response to an externally imposed employability agenda. It is to these arguments that the following two sections now turn.

### **Applied politics as a sub-discipline**

To teach applied, or practical, politics is to lay oneself open to the charge that an emphasis on practice represents an atheoretical approach more suited to the ‘how to’ guides of an airport bookshop than to the halls of academe. At a certain level of generalisability it is indeed the case that teaching the practice of politics involves less of a focus on detached observation and theorisation than is to be found in most politics modules. Such, after all, is the point of practical politics courses. It is something of a *non sequitur*, however, to assert that this undermines their intellectual validity in a higher education setting. Applied politics engages with the fundamental question of the purpose of politics as an academic subject. Even three decades ago, Nevil Johnson, professorial fellow at Nuffield College Oxford, was arguing that for universities ‘the pressure to serve practical needs is insistent’, and that political science, in line with many other disciplines, might usefully be reconstructed into pure and applied politics (Johnson 1989: 9, 137). Tracing the emergence of politics as both university subject and ‘science’, Johnson took the view that to overemphasise the notion of politics as a science might not always be the most appropriate justification for the appearance of politics on the university syllabus. His alternative suggestion sought to put greater emphasis on ‘practical formulations of political study ... avoiding any pretensions to scientific status or theoretically grounded generality’ and justifying the place of politics degrees through vocational utility in the wider social studies setting (Johnson 1989: 8). In the contemporary context, such a suggestion smacks of an intellectual diminution, if not abdication, but perhaps seemed less so at a time when applied social studies – in university departments of social policy and public/social administration – had been moving towards a more radical political approach to society’s problems (Davis 2008: 17).

In the United States during the same decade a number of universities established not just modules but whole programmes that sought ‘to bridge the gap between the basic theoretical pursuits of political science and the applied needs of political campaigns’ (Binford 1985: 89). Bridging, rather than jumping, the gap is the apposite phrase, implying as it does the linking of theory and practice rather than an emphasis on what divides. Binford’s assessment of such programmes begins by



quoting the scathing criticism offered by Joseph Napolitan – the Lynton Crosby of his day, and the founder of the American Association of Political Consultants – that there is ‘little relationship, if any, between political science and politics’ (1985: 89). The solution offered by a pedagogy of applied politics is not to jump over definitively to the practitioner side of the divide and to just teach tactics and techniques. It is rather to apply to the practice of politics the theoretical understandings, the models, and the quantitative, analytical and ethical approaches of political science research.<sup>6</sup>

Recent research by Amy Jasperson into ‘the perceived disconnect between the two worlds’ of academics and political practitioners similarly emphasises commonalities rather than a chasm of separation. Jasperson’s survey of those who had left graduate research in politics in order to take up political positions outside of academe found that political science training is applied to current practical problems in contexts that require adaptability in the use of such skills as abstract reasoning, the generation of research questions, and the ability to handle data (Jasperson 2006). Applied politics modules can bring an adaptive focus by employing, for example, issue-based engagement with political practitioners, simulations of political decision-making, ‘real world’ political communication online, peer assessment of students’ one-to-one or group-based engagement, and the replacement of essay-based assessment with the writing of policy papers.

### **Applied politics – the critical approach**

In 2016 the UK government introduced the Higher Education and Research Bill into parliament, building on the White Paper *Success as a Knowledge Economy* (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2016). This White Paper asserted that ‘for most students, the most important outcome of higher education is finding employment’, drawing for evidence on a Quality Assurance Agency report which found that ‘across all subjects of study, the primary purpose for students entering higher education was to improve their career prospects’ (Kandiko and Mawer 2013: 9). That students want their university experience to improve their employment prospects is neither surprising nor in dispute in this article. The development of applied politics modules represents an important response to student expectation in this regard. But for that response to reflect the nature of the discipline of politics requires something deeper than just delivering skills for employment. Politics is about ideologies, power, systems of government, values, rights, human well-being, and much more. To serve its students and its discipline, applied politics must embrace a wider approach than simply supporting employability in the world as it is.

Let us consider again the high priority given by today’s students to enhancing their employment prospects. A critical response might emphasise that this stems largely from the heavy debt that students have had to take on, following the introduction and then trebling of tuition fees in recent years. A recent survey asked young people in the UK to identify the single most important political issue to them; at the top of the list came concerns over education and employment – a third ‘prioritised concerns over the future of higher education’, particularly fees and debt, and a third ‘were concerned about employment- and finance-related issues’ (Henn and Foard 2012: 53). Deeper critical analysis might contend further that student anxiety over their future financial insecurity arises from the very nature of the neoliberal system, with its marketised solutions to policy

challenges, monetisation of public goods, precarious labour market, penchant for personal debt, and so on. If the immediate solution for individual students is high remuneration after graduation, a deeper and longer-term solution for students *in toto* perhaps lies in political change and contestation? Furthermore, the balance of preference might be presumed to tilt more towards the latter solution amongst students of politics than amongst the student body as a whole. Considered – and taught – from this perspective, modules on the practice of politics move beyond the atomised instrumentalism of tips and techniques designed to facilitate employment and careers, graduate premiums and debt repayment. The focus widens to make room too for political visions that do not foreclose alternative modes of social interaction and governance. Consideration of political vocation, not simply profession, opens up space for a broader consideration of what practising politics means. Approaching applied politics teaching from the perspective of critical pedagogy facilitates reconsideration of its purpose and rigour in a context that sees education as:

‘important not only for gainful employment but also for creating the formative culture of beliefs, practices, and social relations that enable individuals to wield power, learn how to govern, and nurture a democratic society that takes equality, justice, shared values, and freedom seriously’ (Giroux 2011: 4)

A critical approach to teaching the practice of politics would not consent to the neoliberal worldview of business and government, but rather lean towards Noam Chomsky’s view that, ‘the social and intellectual role of the university should be subversive in a healthy society’ (Chomsky and Otero 2003: 198). From this perspective, any pedagogy of political engagement ought not to confine itself to the careerist ambitions of those who do politics in suits, but rather should emphasise social activism and a questioning of the system. As set out earlier, this paper argues that a ‘values first’ approach to teaching applied politics allows the normative to come from students so that, to oversimplify through dichotomy, both the ‘careerist’ and the ‘activist’ gain equally from consideration of how we practise politics.

The idea of the normative coming from the students has been a key element in the notion of the ‘student as producer’ embedded across the disciplines in the approach and procedures of the University of Lincoln in recent years. The concept of ‘student as producer’ was developed by Mike Neary and Joss Winn, and provides a critique of ‘the corporatization of higher education and the configuration of the student as consumer’, drawing on a Marxist understanding of capitalist production and a re-working of the relationship between academic and student (Neary and Winn 2009: 137). Neary and Winn contend that ‘the process of the student as consumer ... demands not only that students pay undivided attention to their employability, but also, at the same time, prepare themselves for periods of under-employability, un-employability, student poverty and debt’ (2009: 126). Student as producer, on the other hand, promotes collaboration between student and academic. Rather than the educator acting as a conduit for existing hegemonic values, the idea is that student and educator engage together in speculative thinking. Neary and Winn seek to learn lessons from the Humboldtian model of ‘organic scholarship’, where the simple transmission of knowledge from university lecturer to student would be abandoned in favour of dialogue. They note, however, that

‘Humboldt’s model was quickly overwhelmed by what he feared most: the rise of industrial capitalism and the subsumption of the ‘Culture State’ by the ‘Commercial

State', to which the university became increasingly tied through government and private sector research contracts' (2009: 129)

Where Neary and Winn offer a critique of the consumerist employability approach which is applicable across the disciplines, Annabel Kiernan takes a similar stance with specific regard for the discipline of politics. She engages with the teaching of applied politics from a normative perspective focused on the creation of 'non-hegemonic spaces' in which students ought to learn about doing the politics of social change, 'vibrant democracy', and activism, in opposition to 'mass education, the corporatisation of university life, [and] the general decline in associational life'. Kiernan argues:

'that the economic and political context of neoliberalism and its reach, as a dominant discourse, into HE's learning space means that we need to go further in political science teaching and introduce spaces in the curriculum for teaching and learning *activism*.' (2012: 187)

Kiernan's perspective is that the corporatisation of universities embeds the demands of the market ever deeper into the lives of academics and students alike, making them less and less likely to embody Chomsky's argument that 'education's role should be to facilitate dissent and protest' (2012: 190). Whilst in the 1980s Nevil Johnson suggested that universities' politics programmes might major on the teaching of applied politics, Kiernan proposes further that applied politics ought to be taught from a more subversive perspective than the former civil servant Johnson had in mind, and that students be invited 'either within an "employability" module or as a standalone project ... to organise and participate in political activism on campus' (2012: 193). So radical a proposal would not sit easily within most UK universities, though it has been tried in a small niche college in the United States whose mission embraces environmental sustainability. Students exploring the link between literature and political activism were given an assessment, based on the pedagogical principle of experiential learning, in which they were required 'to plan and execute an act of social protest or civil disobedience' (Miles 2009: 865).

Kiernan's concern is that the neoliberal corporatisation of contemporary universities has played a part in creating politically disengaged students who are 'instrumental consumers of education' (2012: 193). Her response to that situation is to aim for transformation, rather than the mere provision of information. 'In other words, we should deliver activism' (2012: 189). To unpack this approach is not to completely disagree with it, but rather to suggest that the contemporary situation in UK politics departments is more nuanced than such a picture conveys. All students can be said to be consumers, since they are paying a good deal of money for their education. To be a student-consumer cannot be taken as an indicator of a particular attitude towards anything. Similarly, any life choice is to some degree instrumental. There is no bifurcation between Kiernan's 'instrumental consumer' and the interested, engaged student. On the question of whether today's students are politically disengaged, there are some data that assert this to be the case, but these indicate 'a considerable aversion to formal, professional politics' such as elections and party membership (Henn and Foard 2012: 64), whereas 'civil engagement, in the form of volunteering, is at an all-time high and young people are interested in participating in our democracy when it is made accessible and relevant to them' (Mycock and Tonge 2014: 3). Furthermore, it is a safe assumption that when we are talking about politics students, then they are far less likely than the student population as a whole to be

disengaged from politics. Otherwise they have made a somewhat perverse choice of degree programme.

From the assertion that all students are instrumental consumers, and that politics students are interested in politics, let us return to the question of whether teaching applied politics should be identified as a response to government-inspired demands for employability to be embedded in degree programmes, or whether it is more appropriate to accept Chomsky's assertion that universities should be subversive. Again, so polarised a perspective ought usefully to give way to a more nuanced response. Teaching the practice of politics in a manner which makes space for the activist and the careerist is both preferable and possible. It is preferable because neither of the two extremes sit easily with contemporary politics departments in UK universities. To respond to an external government agenda undermines academic autonomy, and particularly so for those who seek political solutions outside of business-focused, neoliberal paradigms. At the same time, a subversive applied politics programme would not be supported by its students, by its institution, or by government. Instead, an applied politics curriculum which focuses on aspects of political life common across the ideological spectrum, and encourages students to apply their own normative values to political practice, can not only satisfy both careerist and activist, but can also enhance the experience of each through engagement with the other. Applied politics modules can be taught in a way that neither buys into nor rejects a marketised, neoliberal worldview, since the normative aspect of their content can be supplied by the students themselves. Taking such an approach provides a solution to the question of whether the teaching of applied politics is about turning out employment-focused individuals who do their politics wearing suits and climbing the career ladder, or whether its aim is to encourage the subversion of existing norms. In short, the answer is that these two options are not mutually exclusive when it comes to pedagogical approach and module design. A focus on political skills and individual values allows students to develop generic abilities beneficial to the conduct of all politics, and to do so within the context of their own values.

My own version of the 'Practice of Politics' module develops generic political skills like communication in various forms, different approaches to decision-making, and more personal 'people skills' such as how to work with people with whom you disagree. As noted earlier, consideration of these aspects of political practice would typically include theoretical insights explored within the context of values and practice. The communication element of the curriculum covers approaches suited to different types of political engagement, including public speaking, writing formal policy briefs, and blogging. Consideration of approaches to decision-making covers different settings; the formal structured discussion of a committee or board meeting, the rule-bound debate of a council chamber, and the more informal process of decision-making in cooperative and activist networks. Using in-class simulations, we weigh-up the pros and cons of consensus decision-making versus voting. Some of the detailed curriculum content – for example, topics for assessments – is decided by the group as a whole, necessitating the employment of political skills such as discussion and advocacy. The module also considers 'people skills', from the 'hard' focus on networking and cultivating political support, to 'softer' attributes such as contributing positively to engagement with others, listening as well as speaking, and an appropriate balance between supportive and critical interaction. A series of guests from across the spectrum of political views and modes of political participation provide insights into political practice in terms of both professional

and voluntary activity. The emphasis is consistently on the notion that politics can be expressed in different ways, in different roles, in campaigns, in a party, in a variety of formal careers, on a voluntary ad-hoc basis, in an office in Whitehall or in a tent at a climate camp. All of these aspects of political activity have value to both the activist and the careerist, and the inclusion of both perspectives enhances the experience and knowledge of all, widening perspectives rather than offering a narrow interpretation of political practice.

### **Conclusion – Applied Politics as *Beruf***

In conclusion let us return to the opening discussion around the translation of Weber's *Politik als Beruf*. Throughout this article I have sought both to maintain the distinction between vocation and profession within the word *Beruf* and yet at the same time to argue that applied politics teaching does not need to make a choice between one or the other. Whether students see the outworking of their politics as a career choice, an all-encompassing calling, or some combination of the two, a 'values-first' approach to teaching the practice of politics gives students space, permission, and frameworks to do what is not usually allowed in a university classroom – though perhaps late at night in a student residence – namely, to explore in community their intentional, teleological life paths, their eudemonic conceptualisations of human flourishing. The Aristotelian notion of 'the good life' ought never to be a matter of abstract theory, but by definition it has to be lived. Applied politics in this sense means not only the application of politics to the outside world, but also the application of our inner selves, our values and instincts, to the outworking of our political lives. These aspects are of a different register from the usual scholarly discourse on politics programmes in higher education. They are not merely thought or mentally acquiesced to but they operate on a deeper level. For this reason they can be difficult to engage with in the context of the norms of university politics classes, where knowledge stands as a primarily rational and intellectual category.

Some scholars have sought to conceptualise 'values-based politics' as a 'politics of love', and in doing so to embrace a number of key emphases that would be at home in a practice of politics module – kindness, enduring warmth, deep concern, the importance of all people, collectivity, compassion, responsibility, forgiveness, and honesty (Harris and McKibbin 2015). The cause of hesitancy around the discussion of love, responsibility, collectivity, compassion and so on in the university classroom stems to some extent from the assumption that these are private matters of personal belief that stray closer to the emotions than to the mind, and therefore lie beyond the reach of the accepted discourse of political science. Contemporary philosophical scholarship notes, however, 'a shift in modernity with respect to the hierarchical distinction between knowledge and belief' (Ward 2014: 16). This shift has significance in the world of politics. To teach applied politics without acknowledging the force of pre-rational values and norms is to present our students with too shallow an account of what motivates political practice and its success or failure. Wendy Brown, Professor of Political Science at Berkeley, has argued that the rise of President Obama in the United States was notable because of this very pre-rational force, rather than any detailed programmatic set of policies.

'[H]is gift to progressives was belief itself – belief in belief ... what was striking about the Obama phenomenon was what it revealed about us – how much American leftists and liberals yearn for this belief, this renewal of hope, this excitement of political desire' (Brown 2010: 85).

Teaching applied politics offers the potential to move beyond a Cartesian emphasis on the mind alone and to encourage a deeper sense of engagement, not stemming solely from ideas and information, but from a more embedded self, situated within the desires and values and relationships which make up political life. Such a perspective sits well with critical pedagogy as ‘an important vehicle for ... social transformation’, and its call for ‘the formation of critically thinking and socially active individuals’ (Nikolakaki, Giroux et al. 2012: 20, 27). What teaching the practice of politics seeks to do is not only to apply scholarly understandings and concepts, but also to transcend them and to engage too with beliefs, attitudes, community interactions – all of which can be understood and taught as mental concepts, but are *experienced* on a deeper level, as gut feelings and instincts.

The naming and identification of what Harris and McKibbin term ‘everyday values’ in tasks and discussions around the practice of politics can have a particular impact on the formation of political practice. These values and norms are not the sole focus of classes, but are explored within and alongside more prosaic engagement with political skills, issues, and careers. Nonetheless, they can be the most memorable and enduring aspects of the module, and of equal relevance to students across the spectrum of political position and ambition. Through the articulation and discussion of personal political priorities and drivers the familiar tension between materialist and post-materialist values identified by Ronald Inglehart in the 1970s (1977) plays out in the contemporary political world, where for the current generation of students ‘the politics of self-actualization’ are ever more bounded by materialist concerns in the context of economic decline and uncertainty (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 136).

The philosopher Charles Taylor uses the term ‘social imaginaries’ to describe those aspects of political life which go deeper than theoretical approaches. He adopts the term ‘imaginary’ precisely because of the ‘unlimited and indefinite nature’ of human relationships, collective practices and ‘our whole predicament: how we stand to each other, how we got to where we are, how we relate to other groups, and so on’ (Taylor 2004: 24-25).<sup>7</sup> Taylor’s social imaginary speaks of the normative and relational complex of understandings that stands with and behind our politics and life choices. As an illustration of the differing perceptions brought to applied politics modules by academics and students alike, we can make distinctions between careerist and activist, between politics as a profession and politics as a vocation; but so clear a dividing line is not found in any individual. We all embody a mix of ambitions, ideals, obligations, norms, abilities, and opportunities. At one and the same time, politics students can – and I suspect many do – want to get a good job *and* to change the world. Just like our students, applied politics modules can hold both of these drives in tension.

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<sup>7</sup> The thread of thought from information to formation, and into discussion of Taylor’s social imaginaries draws on the writing of James K.A. Smith Smith, J. K. A. (2009). Desiring the kingdom : worship, worldview, and cultural formation. Grand Rapids, Mich., Baker Academic.

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